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ABSTRACT

A study focused on how the broadcasting and advertising industries dealt publicly, through the medium of the trade journal, with political pressures shortly after the end of the Second World War. Was blacklisting and the political screening of talent acknowledged in the trade press? If so, did the publications approve or disapprove of the methods used by broadcasters and advertisers to keep alleged communists off the air? The weekly publications selected for analysis included "Advertising Age," "Broadcasting/Telecasting," "Variety," "Advertising Agency," and "Sponsor." All issues of the five trade publications appearing between 1950 and 1956 were analysed--the dates chosen to reflect the height of the blacklisting system. The consensus in most of the trade press was that communists or communist sympathizers in television did represent a genuine threat to national security. The main disagreement among these publications was about the methods used to remove such persons from broadcasting. No evidence was presented that national security had been compromised by television performers, writers, or producers. The world of mass communication cracked badly under the pressures of McCarthyism. Most of the advertising and broadcasting trade press fell in line with the prevailing hysteria. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (MG)

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by
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The Response of the Broadcasting and Advertising Trade Press to Television Blacklisting Practices, 1950-1956

by Pama A. Mitchell

July, 1989

In the early years of commercial television, broadcasters and advertisers developed the new medium under the shadow of McCarthyism. After a 1950 publication accused broadcasting performers and technicians of communist sympathies, individuals on this and other similar lists found it difficult to obtain employment in the emerging television industry. Advertisers, advertising agencies and the television networks participated in the systematic blacklisting of allegedly communist individuals--a system that also was called political screening.

This study focuses on how the broadcasting and advertising industries dealt publicly, through the medium of the trade journal, with contemporary political pressures. Was blacklisting and the political screening of talent acknowledged in the trade press? If so, did the publications approve or disapprove of the methods used by broadcasters and advertisers to keep alleged communists off the air?

The trade publications that were most pertinent to television advertisers, advertising agencies, and network and station management in the 1950s were selected for analysis. The weeklies Advertising Age, Broadcasting/Telecasting, and Variety were studied, along with Advertising Agency and

Sponsor, both of which went from monthly to bi-weekly publication during the 1950s.

Selection of a time frame for this study was guided by the New York Times Subject Index listing of news stories about broadcasting and McCarthyism from the late 1940s through the 1950s. All issues of the five trade publications were analyzed between 1950 and 1956, dates chosen to reflect the height of the blacklisting system.

Advertising Agency wrote that in the entertainment industry the term blacklisting "usually means a list of people with Communist-front records or who at one time have been (or still are) Party members" ("Riddle," 1956, p. 32). The same magazine elaborated in a later issue that blacklisting signified "the refusal to use the services of an individual because of known or presumed associations or acts which label the person controversial" ("Reports on blacklisting," 1956, p. 64).

Blacklisting in broadcasting can be traced to the 1950 publication of Red Channels (American Business Consultants, 1950), a booklet that listed 151 alleged communists then employed in radio and television. A few months later, an actress listed in Red Channels became the target of an organized public campaign demanding her removal from the cast of an NBC-TV series. The program's sponsor responded by firing the actress, Jean Muir, who claimed she had been unjustly

accused. This became the first highly publicized case of political screening or blacklisting in television.

In 1956, a two-volume report on blacklisting in radio, television, and motion pictures was issued by the Fund for the Republic, an independent foundation created in 1953 by the Ford Foundation for the support of the Bill of Rights. The report (Cogley, 1956) publicized the secretive employment practices it said had become "institutionalized" in broadcasting since 1950. Also in 1956, former CBS talk-show host John Henry Faulk sued an anti-communist newsletter that had identified him as a "fellow traveler," contending that he had lost his job as a result (Faulk, 1983). Although his case was not tried and settled in his favor until 1962, Faulk won important preliminary court decisions in 1956.

Broadcast Advertising in 1950

In the 1950s, advertisers wielded a significant amount of direct influence in broadcast programming, largely because of a system of single sponsorship of programs. Network radio in the 1930s and 1940s was dominated by a handful of large New York and Chicago ad agencies that produced or hired others to produce the majority of prime-time entertainment programs.

Network television at first was quite similar. Sponsors' advertising agencies hired the talent to produce network programs and oversaw many aspects of production. A company associated its name and product with a particular program. Advertisers thus were sensitive to controversy involving

persons associated with their programs. Because selection and control of programming rested more with advertisers and their agencies than with the networks, the advertisers' role in blacklisting practices was substantial.

The Political Climate: McCarthyism

Senator Joseph McCarthy seized the issue of communist subversion and rode it to national prominence in early 1950. But the Truman administration already had laid the groundwork for McCarthy to build upon. In March, 1947, President Truman signed an executive order requiring the more than two million federal employees to undergo loyalty investigations and to sign loyalty oaths (Feuerlicht, 1972, p. 47). One month later, Congress approved legislation stipulating that federal workers could be dismissed and applicants refused employment for sabotage, treason, and for "membership in, affiliation with, or sympathetic association with, any foreign or domestic organization, movement, group or combination of persons designated by the Attorney General. . . as communist, or subversive" (U.S. House of Representatives, 1947, p. 8).

The Attorney General drew up such a list, which included not only communist or socialist organizations but also what were called "fronts" for communism. Among the groups listed--nearly 150 organizations by 1951--were the American League Against War and Fascism, the Congress of American Women, the League of American Writers, Southern Negro Youth Congress, and

several organizations supporting anti-Franco forces in Spain (Committee on Un-American Activities, 1951, pp. 154-5).

The federal loyalty oath and the Attorney General's list spawned imitators throughout the nation. State and local governments, as well as businesses, universities and schools started requiring that employees sign statements disavowing communists sympathies and promising not to overthrow the U.S. government (Feuerlicht, 1972, p. 49). In 1949, CBS became one of the first media companies to require a loyalty oath from all its employees--to refuse to sign could mean losing one's job (Sperber, 1986).

The Communist Threat and Broadcasting

The American postwar Red scare encompassed a fear that communism could somehow conquer the nation through its media. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover warned in 1949 that Communist Party members "have not only infiltrated the airways but now are persistently seeking radio channels." Hoover also said, "Communist schools and Communist fronts have offered training courses [in] radio and television writing, acting and directing" ("When the whirlwinds," 1955, p. 106).

In 1950, an American Legion publication told readers about "several million dollars a year of Communist income derived indirectly from your pockets by highly paid entertainers...who in turn make large contributions to Communist causes and fronts" ("Red entertainers," 1950, p. 62D). An Advertising Agency editorial worried about more

insidious methods of subversion, writing: "We are all aware of the subtlety with which Communist propaganda can be slipped into non-suspect sources of public information" ("Blacklisting," 1956, p. 14).

In Congress, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) had begun investigating communist influence in Hollywood in 1947. The publicity surrounding the HUAC hearings and the ensuing Hollywood Ten trials put the broadcasting and advertising industries on notice.

The threat of the government's becoming involved in keeping Reds out of television may have been implicit. But for the most part private groups rather than government actions led directly to the practice of blacklisting controversial persons. And bowing to pressure from private groups may have helped the industry preempt government action.

One of the first private groups to target radio and television was the American Legion. In 1950, American Legion Magazine warned about communist influence in broadcasting, and urged readers to write directly to sponsors rather than to stations or networks with complaints about the political activities of talent ("Red entertainers," 1950).

If the Attorney General's list included some organizations whose threat to national security seemed debatable, many of these other groups cast an even wider net. Other groups active in urging political background checks on broadcasting personnel were the Catholic War Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars,

AWARE, Inc., and the Veterans Action Committee of Syracuse Super Markets. This last was the operation of Syracuse grocery store owner Laurence Johnson. Johnson's influence on Madison Avenue grew as the 1950s progressed, during which he kept up a virtual one-man campaign to keep subversives off the air.

One of the most influential organizations to focus on communism in broadcasting was American Business Consultants, formed in 1947 by three zealous anti-communists, two of whom were former FBI investigators. Their weekly publication Counterattack: Facts to Combat Communism, also started in 1947, listed individuals and organizations accused of having communist sympathies or abetting communism. In 1948, Counterattack published a list of 192 "communist front" organizations--119 of which did not appear on the Attorney General's list (Cogley, 1956, p. 7).

American Business Consultants also provided what it called a research service, wherein sponsors or agencies could hire the company to investigate the political background of potential employees. For a fee, the company would "clear" talent before they were hired.

In 1950, American Business Consultants published a special volume devoted to broadcasting and targeted to influence advertisers and network executives. Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television (American Business Consultants, 1950) contained the names of 151 broadcast writers, directors, producers, and performers. Some

of those listed were Henry Morgan, Gypsy Rose Lee, Burl Ives, Judy Holliday, Frederic March, The Weavers, and Jean Muir.

The Jean Muir Case

The first publicized effort to remove the taint of subversion from television was the Jean Muir case in August, 1950. Muir, an actress who then had 20 years of experience in radio and television, played the mother in the NBC-TV situation comedy The Aldrich Family. After the program's sponsor, General Foods, received letters and phone calls referring to Muir's listing in Red Channels, the company dropped her from the program.

The broadcast oriented trade press gave considerable attention to the Muir case. Variety devoted several paragraphs in a front-page story to Muir's reaction to the firing and her denial of left-wing sympathies. The article also reported that NBC, General Foods' advertising agency Young and Rubicam, and the program's producer all had tried to convince the sponsor not to fire the actress ("Ousting," 1950). In an editorial, Variety criticized NBC for allowing what the editors saw as a dangerous precedent, writing that "the onus is directly on the doorstep of the network. They alone, by acting now, can stop the impending deluge" ("Danger signal," 1950, p. 25).

Broadcasting, like Variety, held the network responsible for firing Muir. Broadcasting doubted NBC's contention that General Foods acted unilaterally and outside of the network's

control. Such a policy of network non-involvement "would be completely out of character with the record of American broadcasters who have always enthusiastically accepted the responsibility of policing their own air," claimed a Broadcasting editorial ("Radio's responsibility," 1950, p. 38).

None of the sampled advertising publications wrote an editorial about the Muir case.

Sponsor Investigates Red Channels

In October and November, 1951, Sponsor ran a series of three articles about the "Red talent problem" in broadcasting; this was one of the first trade press explorations of the pressures being exerted on advertisers and broadcasters by communist-hunters.

Sponsor devoted two of these articles ("Truth about," Parts 1, 2, 1951) to an examination of American Business Consultants (ABC), publishers of Red Channels and Counterattack. The magazine doubted the validity of the sources used by ABC to identify subversives and denounced the operation as "a threat to the freedom of broadcast advertisers" ("Truth about," Part 2, p. 80). It concluded in an editorial that "the blacklisting practices that [ABC] has advanced are just plain bad business procedure for radio and TV sponsors" ("Why we dislike," 1951, p. 88).

The Sponsor series was a unique investigative report of the blacklisting phenomenon in broadcasting. While the other major trade publications did not ignore the practice, none

looked closely at it. As the Sponsor articles noted, it "had become the most hush-hush subject along Madison Avenue and Michigan Boulevard. . . as though many high-brass members of the industry had banded together to form a furtive, almost conspirational, Gentleman's Agreement of silence" ("Truth about," Part 1, 1951, p. 29).

In 1956 the Fund for the Republic report supported the conclusions Sponsor had reached five years earlier. The report said that by 1952 "political screening was almost universally practiced on Madison Avenue," and that persons listed in Red Channels, Counterattack or otherwise charged with having communist sympathies "found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get work without first being cleared" (Cogley, 1956, p. 25). But throughout the early 1950s the broadcasting and advertising trade press paid little attention to the phenomenon.

Ad Agency Informant Goes Public

In early 1955, Harvey Matusow, a former Communist and an FBI informant, testified in a U.S. District Court that he had been employed by two advertising agencies to identify subversives in radio and television. Matusow said that in 1952 the Lennen & Newell agency had paid him $150 "to make up a blacklist. . . [which] resulted in the dropping of one television show's producer." He also claimed that this list, and another compiled for the agency BBD&O, was a fabrication,

and that he actually had not even known many of the persons on his lists ("Matusow admits fake," 1955, p. 15).

Although the two agencies denied purchasing blacklists as such, they did not convincingly refute the substance of Matusow's testimony. Lennen & Newell president Adolph Toigo contended that his agency had only done as other agencies had "in trying to protect the heavy expenditures clients make [in TV shows] from the kinds of problems that come up when 'minor pressure groups' complain" ("Matusow tells about," 1955, p.1).

Two of the trade papers commented editorially about the Matusow testimony, both acknowledging the existence of some form of blacklisting by advertising agencies. Advertising Age expressed sympathy for the need for agencies and advertisers to be sensitive to public opinion. But Matusow's activities, the magazine said, "ought to strengthen the resolve of all decent people, in or out of advertising, not to be too easily stampeded" by informants' claims ("Matusow tells all," 1955, p. 12).

Variety contended that the Matusow testimony reflected poorly on the advertising agency profession, and that it would be "good public relations" for agencies to discontinue any use of blacklists ("Matusow recant," 1955, p. 21).

1956: The Lid Comes Off

If the Matusow charges prompted some trade press attention to blacklisting, events in 1956 led to the greatest scrutiny yet of these practices. Even Advertising Agency, a publication

that virtually had ignored the controversy, devoted numerous editorials during the second half of 1956 to the issues surrounding blacklisting. During that year, additional evidence supported the implication of the Matusow testimony that advertisers may have been more responsible than the networks in the systematic practice of blacklisting persons because of their alleged political beliefs and associations.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1956, the House Un-American Activities Committee issued an annual report containing what Advertising Agency termed "serious allegations against the advertising agency business" ("How can," 1956, p. 30). HUAC's report accused unnamed agencies of closing their eyes to Communist affiliations and activities of various television performers. In addition to demands from private organizations to remove alleged subversives from broadcasting, HUAC now threat ened to exert governmental pressure on the industry.

But Advertising Agency concluded that "virtually nobody on Capitol Hill puts much importance on this phase of Communist-hunting, unless there might be a case which could involve a headline for a committee member" ("How can," 1956, p. 30). Indeed, when HUAC again looked at broadcasting, the committee went after the publishers of a blacklisting expose.

This expose was the Fund for the Republic's study released in mid-June (Cogley, 1956). The report described the security systems at the networks and agencies, the methods used to clear

accused persons, and identified some of the alleged practitioners of blacklisting.

During the same week that the report was released, John Henry Faulk filed a lawsuit against AWARE, Inc., an agency that supplied sponsors, advertising agencies, and networks with reports on the political backgrounds of talent. AWARE, like American Business Consultants, also operated a clearance service; for a fee, politically suspect persons could improve their rating. AWARE was the subject of a chapter in the Fund report. "With blacklisting firmly established on Madison Avenue," it said, "AWARE's main function has been to uphold it and call for its extension" (Cogley, 1956, p. 133). Laurence Johnson, the Syracuse supermarket owner and a supporter of AWARE, was a codefendant in the Faulk lawsuit.

HUAC subpoenaed the Report on Blacklisting's author, John Cogley, as well as a number of persons named in the report as "clearance" men with the authority to "decide the difference between employment and unemployment in radio and television," according to Broadcasting. The reputed clearance men, while denying that they perpetuated a blacklist, "all admitted that they have been engaged in the work of keeping communists or communist sympathizers out of the entertainment media and of 'rehabilitating' those who have seen the error of their ways" ("House explores," 1956, p. 29).

These witnesses drew fine distinctions in their desire both to placate HUAC regarding their vigilance against

communism and to deny unethical and arbitrary practices outlined in the Fund report. But the hearings did not amount to much: no rulings were issued, charges brought, or legislation passed. Perhaps the only evident effect was to further publicize the blacklisting controversy.

Each of the trade publications covered the Fund report, the Faulk lawsuit, and the HUAC hearings. Advertising Agency published two lengthy articles about these issues late in 1956 ("Reports" and "Riddle," 1956). The two articles are reminiscent of Sponsor's three-part investigation of blacklisting in 1951. Taken together, they represent the only lengthy contemporary reporting in the trade journals about the political screening of talent in broadcasting. But while Sponsor had stressed civil liberties and had taken a liberal viewpoint, Advertising Agency's slant was decidedly more supportive of measures to keep the industry free of the taint of communism.

Broadcasting, like Advertising Agency, responded to the 1956 revelations by concluding that even an unjust system of political screening was preferable to allowing communists access to the airwaves ("More light," 1956). Sponsor and Variety tended toward a more libertarian editorial viewpoint. This divergence of opinion in the trade press probably was a reflection of a lack of certainty in the industry about how best to respond to private and governmental pressures to banish (actual or alleged) leftists from broadcasting.

Evaluating Trade Press Response to Blacklisting

In the early 1950s, the political climate--characterized not only by virulent anti-communism but also by governmental activism, especially in the legislative branch--affected virtually all media businesses. A recurrent editorial concern of the broadcasting and advertising trade press involved worries about government interference in business. Virtually every issue of the weeklies--Broadcasting, Advertising Age and Variety--reported some threatened government action. These included bills proposed in Congress to establish oversight of TV programming or advertising content and Federal Communications Commission suggestions about tightening regulation of the networks or complicating station license application and renewal procedures.

Despite the common concerns of the trade publications, responses to blacklisting differed. Advertising Age can be characterized as moderate to liberal editorially on this subject. It felt that known communists should be denied employment in television, but that individual civil rights must not be sacrificed in a rush to judgment. "In any time of hysteria, we ought to bear firmly in mind that everyone is innocent until he is proved guilty," one editorial stated. "When the facts are known, certainly they should be acted upon. But let's make sure we've got them first" ("Matusow tells all," 1955, p. 12).

Broadcasting lamented radio and television's vulnerability to government regulation, and thus to "the reformers, the politicians and the competitive forces that begrudge broadcasters their share of the advertising dollar." Perhaps it was not coincidental that the magazine, which wanted to minimalize federal involvement in the industry, failed to denounce the practice of blacklisting. Its editors moved from defending free speech in the early 1950s to a much more conservative viewpoint in 1956, when it essentially defended blacklisting by saying that "the record would be even less attractive if the hirers of talent had refused to recognize the problem of subversives on the air" ("More light," 1956, p. 116).

Variety had covered the HUAC Hollywood probe exhaustively, and throughout the 1950s continued to follow news about "Red talent" accusations in the movie industry. Variety also devoted considerable space to talent union efforts (largely futile) to break the blacklisting systems in all the entertainment media. Editorially, Variety was one of the more liberal voices on the subject of blacklisting.

Advertising Agency defended blacklisting, contending that the practice made sense on economic grounds. The magazine advocated what it called business statesmanship in the matter, which required company policies that opposed communism and refused to employ anyone connected with it ("Agencies can't,"

1956). Blacklisting was an efficient, morally acceptable system, Ad Agency contended ("Blacklisting," 1956).

Of the trade publications studied, Sponsor was the most critical of the effects of McCarthyism on freedom of expression in the broadcast media. Its editors worried that television's development would be stultified by the political climate that fostered repression of dissent ("How to keep," 1951). Sponsor also called on advertisers and broadcasters to resist the pressure groups. It framed this call to action in clear moral terms, saying that the industry should "put up a bold, united front against private inquisitioners." What mattered most, Sponsor concluded, was "whether our business world merely pays lip service to the Bill of Rights and to such words as 'freedom' and 'non-discrimination,' or actually lives by the principles inherent in them" ("Why we dislike," 1951, p.88).

Conclusions

The consensus in most of the trade press was that communists or communist sympathisers in television did represent a genuine threat to national security. The main disagreement among these publications was about the methods used to remove such persons from broadcasting.

And yet, no evidence that national security had been compromised by television performers, writers, or producers ever was presented. No blacklisted person was charged with espionage, sabotage, or any other such crime. The world of mass communication indeed cracked badly under the pressures of

McCarthyism. Most of the advertising and broadcasting trade press fell in line with the prevailing hysteria.

Given the context of the times, perhaps this response to blacklisting cannot be judged as unethical or uncourageous. The nation's leaders insisted that a communist conspiracy represented a genuine internal security threat, and that this conspiracy would try to use the nation's communication media. Certainly it was prudent for the trade press not to question the premises advanced by politicians. If this included acceptance of a secretive, ethically problematic system of political screening, then so be it.

By 1960, the worst excesses of the McCarthy period were over, and although the Cold War continued, Americans for the most part stopped looking at their neighbors as potential enemies. The stand against the systematic blacklisting of television talent taken by Sponsor--and, less emphatically, by Variety--showed exceptional courage. If only in hindsight, they were right.

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